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## **Three-Tiered Social Darwinism in Malaysian Ethnographic History\***

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### **Abstract**

Eurocentrism continues to inform the political discourses of former colonies like Malaysia to a large extent. Solid ethnicities were constructed and concretized, first conceptually and later through institutional means, to ease the governance of distant lands by Europeans and to make policies comprehensible to the home audience. In the Malay Peninsula, the “Malays” were essentialized, and declared “native” to the region, in contrast to migrants coming from outside what the British proselytized as a given regional and cultural entity, the Malay world. Such tactics stemmed from the Social Darwinistic mode of thought popular in European thought at the time. In application, an unspoken three-tiered ethnography came into being: The world was made up of spontaneous natives, museal peoples of failed and frozen civilizations and modern Europeans burdened by their recent enlightened state. The pluralistic reality existent in the region was not given recognition, and together with the idea that nations seek expression in united polity, plural societies of segregated ethnicities with minimized interfaces were formed. This is the heritage of the modern state of Malaysia: Ethnic bargaining as a necessity, nation-state rationale as a source of social knowledge, modernization as mankind’s unavoidable fate and western concepts as natural tools of thought.

**Keywords:** colonial knowledge, political discourse, Malaysia, Social Darwinism, ethnography, orientalism, post-colonialism, ethnic politics

### **Stabilizing the Social Ontology**

The social ontology of a country at any given time contains categories selected to structure political discourse. Notions and secondary terms emanate from these fundamental ones and the relationship between them constitutes the general logic of the politicized society.

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Until the breakthrough of Marxist class activism in the beginning of the twentieth century, the factor of race was central to political thought. The shocking extremism practiced by Hitler in the 1930s and 1940s, however, rendered political arguments based on race unacceptable after 1945, except in countries like South Africa and Rhodesia, and, through a direct connection to economics and migratory conditions, Malaysia. Indeed, the very notion of the nation-state involves institutional or practical exclusion often based on ethnicity, and has German idealism as its most articulate ideology.

While working on an earlier analysis of nation building, I realized that the two main categories used to rationalize political agendas in modern times, besides the proselytization of nationhood itself, were race and class. Despite its discursive potential, gender has never been able to upstage consciousness about ethnicity and economic class, and at best worked only for a short time in Afghanistan, Iran and a few other places. In what I call the structuring level of society (in contrast to the spontaneous level) [Ooi 2001], a notion reminiscent of what Shamsul A. B. calls the authority-defined reality (in contrast to everyday-defined reality) [Shamsul 2001a] and what Karl Marx termed the superstructure (in contrast to the productive base), the fluidity of human social existence is conceptually frozen [cf. the shared etymology of “static” and “state”] in order for a control over political development to be possible. This exercise involves normative assumptions within which those ideations make sense, and in time, this interplay grows to make other ways of understanding or forming that society quite difficult.

Wang Gungwu’s musings about the confusion caused by concepts like “nation-state” and “cultural pluralism” in the early life of Malaysian political thought provide further insight into the origins of concepts that have become the foundation of social life and rationalizations [Wang 2001]. First, both these terms tend to suggest the notion of race and express the colonial condition, not only with regards to the method of domination—“divide and rule”—but, as the second point, also in how successful British opposition to communism and socialism at that time disqualified any challenge from class-based argumentations. In principal, a state tends to base discourses on republicanism (citizenship as basic requirement) and culturalism (commonality of rituals). In comparison with other countries in the region, we find that the class paradigm of socialist thought did not gain a strong foothold within British colonies in Southeast Asia. This had the long-term effect of perpetuating the dominant status of the race paradigm. Third, the encouragement of migration from other civilizations like China and India in order to develop industries—a condition encouraged by the three-tiered ethnography introduced below—created a truly multi-ethnic population that necessitated social structuring that left the British at the top of the ethnographic pyramid. Fourth, the association of ethnicity and occupation gained currency over time, bringing with it a strong bias about the general character traits of caricatured race categories [Abraham 1997].

The tradition of race thinking that imbued the colonial project was not limited to Southeast Asia of course. It was indeed informed by a hierarchic view of human and

natural ontology and by the belief that competition brought excellence in all aspects of history. Thus, it spread with the expansion of European power, relying on military, political, and epistemological means.

... what was new in European colonialism was its planetary reach, its affiliation with global institutional power, and its imperative mode, its attempted submission of the world to a single “universal” regime of truth and power. Colonialism is ethnocentrism armed, institutionalized, and gone global. [Shohat and Sham 1994: 16]

Transforming received terms has always been an effective, and some would say unavoidable, measure that all political powers must resort to. In the colonizing context, one of the first examples of such conceptual magic was the Spanish decree in 1556 to replace the word *conquista* (conquest) with *descubrimiento* (discovery) [*ibid.*: 69]. Even today, schoolboys (and post-schoolboys) the world over will be able to give, as reflexively as a knee-jerk, a definite answer to the question “Who discovered America?” without contemplating its discursive bias.

In order to obtain a clearer picture of how a terminology that came to define local cultures and their internal relationship grew out of political contingencies, and how that now stands as a solid wall limiting ideological imaginings and inductive reasoning, it is best to study historical shifts in class and race conceptualizations.

The ancient Chinese argued endlessly about the social ontology of a divinely sanctioned polity. This Zhengming-debate (“The Rectification of Names”) was based on the belief that if a political structure has a morally correct base, it will last forever and justice will reign, by default as it were, over All Under Heaven. If the structuring level, i. e. the powers that can construct concrete social objects and proselytize social, moral and aesthetical abstractions, manages to create stable relationships between stable groups, a foundation for peaceful human existence would have been laid, and morality anchored. Once that is done, reality as the populace understands it, will be obvious and unquestioned. While Confucius and his followers may have believed that putting things into order in this conceptual fashion was a discovery of naturally given truths, we cannot but be skeptical about the ontological status of the resultants of such social engineering. What is clear to us today is that social knowledge is undeniably and unavoidably politically informed.

The Confucian *Xun Zi*, for example, saw political history as a mining for organizational and moral truths:

As the wise sovereign gives structure, names are determined and forms are discerned, the discourse is practiced and the will exercised, and the people are carefully drawn into a single unit. However, when these rectified names are disturbed through the dissembling of concepts and through new coinage of names, the people become distrustful and disagreements abound.

This is tantamount to high treason. This crime equals that of the counterfeiter and a tamperer of weights. His people dare not allow strange names to disturb the rectified names, and so they stay honest. The honest are easily controlled, and those easily controlled form the general public. His people dare not allow strange terms to disturb the rectified names, and so they stay within the discourse and the law, and cautiously, they obey regulations. That is why his state lasts. Achieving a lasting state is the ultimate goal of government, and this is done through the meticulous defense of names. [Xun Zi 1995 Vol. 22: 2 ]

Foucault's rendering of the political nature of knowledge stays the course, postulating that truths are produced "only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint" [Foucault [1972] 1980: 131]. The present work is strongly informed by such a relativistic view of knowledge and accordingly by the intense ties that must exist between knowledge and power, a relationship that constrains thought into a function of politics.

### Colonialism's Three-Tiered Ethnography

Studies about *Orientalism* suggest that early western ethnographic categorizations tended to romanticize "the native" [Said 1978; Sardar 1999]. Rousseau's "noble savage" was the archetype of the original social man uncorrupted by urbanity and civilization. In short, this savage was native in all ways to the land he occupied, as much a part of the landscape as the local fauna and flora. The civilized man, especially the modern western person, has therefore been torn from Mother Nature's bosom into a condition of burdened but true freedom. The scientific ideal of "objective observance" is a more obvious child of this alienating psychology of modernity. This distancing from nature and "natives" which made the scientific manipulation of both possible meant that the human cosmology for the emergent modern (western) man consisted of ( 1 ) peoples embedded in nature (natives, negroes, American Indians), ( 2 ) peoples with civilizational history, who through some essential cultural flaw, failed to gain modernity (Incans, Mayans, and Orientals like Arabs, Indians and Chinese) and thus remain frozen in a culturally static state, and ( 3 ) westerners, who managed the liberatory leap away from the bondage of nature, *and of history*. This Hegelian leap is the source of western ethnocentrism [Ooi 2002]. In short, the first group possesses spontaneity (often perceived as a lack of sustained rationality), the second museality (past-based identification rendering profound change impossible), and the third modernity (largely involving a scientific mode of thought). The eternal museality of the second group provides the space needed to conceive the eternal modernity of the third, giving the supplementary notion that past and present sins committed by western powers which were not worthy of modernity were either incidental or part of a deterministic stage in the evolution of modernity. This paper therefore argues its case through the introduction of a three-tiered typology. The West is modern, the East is

museal, and below and beyond them, we have the uncivilized. These natives, by definition much more natural than peoples with imperial histories, were often transported for months to Europe to be put on show, along with nature's other curiosities. While native Americans (from North and South America) and Eskimos suffered such a fate in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was only in the nineteenth century that natives from the Malay world were put on display. Earlier, their functioning political systems had guaranteed them sufficient respect from the sparse numbers of Europeans visiting the region [van Dijk 2001: 5–6].

This three-tieredness aids an understanding of the initial ethnography constructed for geographical areas that westerners were “discovering.” This “discovering” of inhabited lands revealed an unquestioning social evolutionism, and more importantly, an application of a newly developed method of categorization. The world was being seen anew and had therefore to be re-known, now by liberated (and liberating) beings. In addition to, and beyond, the factors mentioned above motivating race politics in colonial lands, one has to consider the methodological mechanism that not only separated the white man from all others, but also distinguished peoples of failed civilizations from spontaneous natives. The division between failed cultures and “native” societies does in truth vary in accordance with shifts in context. While Arabs were seen as libidinous when troped together with Africans, as businessmen in Southeast Asia, however, they were clearly part of a “failed” culture. The discursive history that grew out of pre-modern European contacts with Africans, Arabs and Turks has presumably had a profound influence in the age of inter-continental colonialism on how other more distant “others” were to be classified. And so, most significantly, we find that in Southeast Asia, the seafaring nature of traditional cultural exchanges presented to the Social Darwinistic eye of the European traveler-colonialist a mixture of easily defined natives and equally demarcated groups of migrants. The conceptual rigidity needed in progressivist evolutionism was brought to bear on an insular world used to orientating itself from the sea and along coastlines, and where the seasonal winds encouraged effective cultural interaction, if not integration [Reid 1990].

The actual existential distance between Europeans and the masses created a need for intermediaries, a role filled by migrants. This state of affairs is reflected in the function of the often immigrant-filled “colonial town” as the contact point between the metropolitan power on the one hand and the colony at large on the other [Hussin 2001]. While pre-colonial towns in Southeast Asia probably had a similar character, the high economic and political ambitions of colonial powers necessitated increasing control and stability from all the parts. Peoples who within the European anthropological nomenclature were obvious immigrants to the region—largely “Orientals” like the Arabs, the Indians and the Chinese—helped define the rest as members of a race category native to the *region*—the Malays. This procedure may have been pseudo-scientific, but in time, political contingencies favored a tactical concretization of such a homogenous race, in conjunction

with similar processes happening within other categories inside the regional ethnographic equation. For example, the term “nationality” used in censuses carried out in the Straits Settlements between 1871 and 1891 was in time replaced by the category of “race.” This insidious conceptual switch was accompanied by a fateful re-categorization of the inhabitants who were not recent immigrants. In 1881, there were categories of Aborigines of the Peninsula, Achinese, Boyanese, Bugis, Dyaks, Javanese, Jawi Pekan (Jaweepekans), Malays and Manilamen. In 1891, these were neatly placed under the heading “Malays & other Natives of the Archipelago,” initiating a slow and steady acceptance of a “Malay race” [Soda 2001: 206]. The Malays proclaim this homogeneity even today, mainly in political contexts, despite the fact that they in everyday life tend to see themselves as heterogeneous.

After the establishment of the Straits Settlements in 1824, Raffles’ concept of ‘Malay nation’ gradually became ‘Malay race’, an identity that was accepted by both the colonial power and the Malays themselves, primarily as the result of the growing presence of others whose ‘race’ was ‘European’ or ‘Chinese’. [Shamsul 2001a: 363].

This three-tiered ethnography of colonial knowledge, though quite obvious, has seldom been noted. The reasons are manifold. First, received concepts and debates muffle alternative descriptions of realities. That is the nature of knowledge. Second, reactions to hegemonic discourse necessarily adopt a scandalized attitude and a politicized agenda. This has meant that “the others” who were made current by European orientalism have been treated by post-colonial writers as an essentially homogenized group that have colonial experience in common. For example, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, the authors note: “colonialist/racist discourse renders the colonized as wild beasts in their unrestrained libidinousness, their lack of proper dress, their mud huts resembling nests and lairs” [Shohat and Sham 1994: 137]. However, this applies largely to the “natives” category. Either these “others” are treated as a comprehensive group or they are personalized through descriptions of individual, but representative fates. It is tactical to focus on commonalities rather than differences that may weaken the potential support among readers.

Third, the post-colonial project of “writing back” is still new and is already running the risk of being hijacked by academics in the west and elsewhere who are turning it into a diluted and abstract exercise. Fourth, the reaction to the received colonial cosmology, though powerful and inspired in content, is weak and narrow in its reach. The reality of post-colonialism for many nations is still very much a struggle to avoid economic and political extinction. Rethinking the structure of the world is an unaffordable luxury and a novelty for these populations in general. Fifth, American racial discourses have historically dealt with the deracinated American Indian and the enslaved African, who both sort under the uncivilized category. This partiality has influenced the structure of

post-colonial analyses to no small extent, especially when one considers the global dominance of America's media and academia [*ibid.*].

Sixth, critiques of colonial ethnography have been greatly blanketed by the notion of orientalism, and have generalized European and colonial ethnographies as embodiments of fear for and fascination with the Arab world and with Islam. This has helped simplify the image of the colonial "other" as the singular caricatured oriental. Seventh, (and this is related to the sixth point), the ideology of Darwinism in colonial application involved a utilitarianism that primarily considered non-whites in functional roles in the development of the superior race. Those who were "in the way" were exterminated, as was the case with as many as 95 million inhabitants of the Americas [Yahya [2000] 2001: 30]. Those needed for their physical strength became slaves, the lot of the Africans. In Mexico and Peru, the physical strength of the natives led to them being converted into serfs. There, colonialism's three-tieredness had slightly different categories. Europeans were at the top, *mestizos* (people of mixed European-native descent) in the middle, and natives (Indios) at the bottom. Although often despised and exploited, the *mestizos* were essential to the stability of the system [Anderson 1983: 58]. Further afield, the distance the European had to travel meant that their numbers always remained limited, which necessitated other strategies in the exploitation of local populations. Therefore, in South Asia and in the Far East, colonialism was achieved through institutional means whereby the manipulation of existent polities and of ethnic differences was vital. The three-tiered ethnography became therefore more obvious in these regions. Theorization on colonialism has, however, paradoxically been strongly overshadowed by Eurocentrism in that Europe's Other continued to be perceived as one entity—the colonials, the Asians, the orientals, the Asian mode of production, the Third World or the South. An ethnographic three-tieredness appeared in central and south America, but there the middle layer consisted of the *mestizos*, people of mixed European-native descent, and not of a population of a failed civilization.

Edward Said's scolding critique of the corps of orientalists whose activities facilitated colonialism through a simplification of human cultures, identified the ethnocentric nature of much of the human and social sciences. Such studies have provided us with details about the dubious origins of many modern fields of knowledge. Colonial knowledge grew together with direct colonial control, each generating the other. In its broad sense, colonial knowledge merely denotes the creation of knowledge about colonies and potential colonies. In a narrower sense, the focus is on the exercising of coercive power on the social ontology in order to establish what Thomas Hobbes called a "community by institution" [Hobbes [1641] 1954].

At this point, let us take a look at the "investigative modalities" that Bernard Cohn saw at work in the colonizing of India [Cohn 1996]. According to the three-tiered ethnography, India was very much a failed civilization. No doubt, there were native-like peoples at the bottom of the human heap, but India was already recognizably structured



around an assortment of political centers. Colonization was very much a sociological exercise, and needed schooled aliens sharing the political goals of the colonialists' home culture. In that fundamental sense, social science is but a prelude to political action. As Cohn argues: "The pan-optical view that the British were constructing led to the reification of India as polity in which conflict . . . could only be controlled by the strong hand of the British" [*ibid.*: 8]. The graphic modality organized knowledge about administrative structures and ideological constructs, and finally recorded and romanticized ongoing British experiences in India. The observational/travel modality presented geographic India as it appeared to the English traveler, often in anecdotal form. The surveying modality involved a more centralized study of political, cultural, economic and geographical structures, and was complemented by the enumerative modality that presented Indian phenomena as statistics. The museological modality saw India as "a source of collectibles and curiosities." Fauna, flora and historical artifacts were there for the picking, and India itself, with its teeming multitudes, was a museum. The surveillance modality aided policing activities, categorizing peoples, groups and individuals, all with English safety in mind [*ibid.*: 3-11]. Together, these modes of knowledge depicted a stagnant civilization in need of European stimulus and guidance. They reveal, at the same time, much about the existential condition of the colonialists. The enormity of India definitely encouraged a distancing view of the Indians and of Indian culture, and given the fact that the British came by sea in relatively small numbers, the search for means of control was desperate. The Social Darwinism of the times was quite evident in the treatment of India as an archeological site with layers of failed civilizations.

Where Southeast Asia is concerned, its insular nature was not as forbidding as the vastness of continental India. Penetration of the Malay World was therefore not a rushed affair. The Europeans "carried on the tradition of port-rulers until the end of the 18th Century" after which time they "emphasized new hierarchies that could be systematically manipulated" [Wang 2001: 26]. The founder of Singapore, Stamford Raffles, once wrote:

I cannot but consider the Malayu nation as one people, speaking one language, though spread over so wide a space, and preserving their character and customs, in all the maritime states lying between the Sulu Seas and the Southern Oceans, and bounded longitudinally by Sumatra and the western side of Papua or New Guinea. [Raffles 1816: 103]

As Shamsul A. B. notes, Raffles' modernist frame of mind introduced the discursive pillars of "Malay nation," "Malay race," "Malay world" and "Malay language" into studies of Southeast Asia [Shamsul 1999: 12]. While the "originator of modern scientific classification of plants and animals," Carl von Linné (1707-78), may have defined race in simplistic terms of physically visible attributes (color, skull shape, hair, etc., dividing the world into Americans, Europeans, Asians and Africans), the colonialists, having traversed many lands and cultures before coming to Southeast Asia, were sensitive to power and

economic structures [Harris and Levey 1975; Bell 1975: 155]. This mode of thought, together with fashionable ideas about nation-categories, perceived an ethnic primordiality (i. e. ethnicity divorced from its situational roots). Once this “primordial people” had been defined, however, it was an easy matter recognizing other less indigenous categories and conditions.

The functional categorization of local inhabitants into “migrants” and “natives” relied on a clear distinction in the mind of the colonialist, and this ontology, once proselytized, perpetuated a dubious ethnography. Legislation and administration based on ethnic divisions concretized the importance of a person’s ethnic category. For example, the indenture system of labor recruitment from limited and specific areas in India and China gave a steady flow of immigrants to the plantations and mines, helping to create isolated and closely knitted communities [Arasaratnam [1970] 1979: 16].

The introduction of legislation like the Malay Reservation Enactment 1913, the setting up of a Department of Chinese Affairs and the special government-approved toddy shops for the Indians during British rule drove home the point further, at the everyday-defined level, to the people at the grassroots that racial categories such as Malay, Indian and Chinese mattered very much if one is to take advantage of what the colonial bureaucracy offered or in order to avoid its wrath. [Shamsul 2001b: 8]

The “natives” were termed Malays, depending on whether or not they had embraced Islam. Non-Muslim natives had other designations. This melded religion and ethnicity together. The “migrants” were by definition non-Malays, whether or not they were Muslims. Migrants from the western part of the Malay world who had moved to the eastern part were all still natives, while those who came from less distant regions in Indo-China were migrants. The migrants, their presence being evidence of an attainment of a higher level of transportation technology, if nothing else, became eternal aliens. Being outsiders, they were predatory in essence. The “natives” were thus naïve victims of these more developed peoples and had therefore to be protected by the supremely developed European, who, being enlightened, was a liberating and not a predatory alien. Priorities in the colonizing process encouraged the British to acknowledge special rights for the “natives” in areas of land tenure, culture, religion and politics.

The sultans were provided with all the outward trappings of sovereignty over the Malay people although in fact they had little control over matters even pertaining to land appropriation for plantation agriculture. At the same time that the British appeared keen to ‘protect’ Malay interests against the Chinese and Indians, they were also responsible for undermining the rural economy where the bulk of Malays lived and worked. [Nair 1999: 70]

It should be noted that “the Malay World,” “Southeast Asia” or the Chinese “Nanyang” do

not always refer to the same geographic region and, as is clear from their origins, the terms have varied in status and substance. Southeast Asia was a word needed by military strategists “to designate an operation theatre between India and China during World War II” [Evers 1980: 2]. “Nanyang” (South Seas) was a conventional term used by the Chinese to refer to regions reachable by boat from southern China. “The Malay World” was apparently a latter-day term expressive of the influence of Islam, and necessitated by nationalism and the concept of the nation-state. (It covers more or less the area marked by Stamford Raffles in the quote given earlier).

Attention should at the same time be paid to the consequences of the limited power that the colonialists possessed when ruling very large populations. Segregation requires less policing and administrative resources than integrative policies do, which explains the rarity of the latter. Political conditions and the economic aims of the colonial powers encouraged effective short-term means in keeping sufficient peace and achieving maximum production. J. S. Furnivall, in his seminal work *Colonial Policy and Practice* [1948] argued that colonialism had to satisfy international capitalism while pacifying the colonized peoples [*ibid.*]. Needless to say, these economic ambitions reinforced the three-tiered ethnography in the colonies.

The position of the politically dominant British, in the allocation of entrepreneurial roles among different ethnic groups became crucial for race relations. Those racial groups whose norms and values were compatible with British mercantile capitalism were considered ‘semi-civilised’, and accordingly allocated most favoured positions. Those racial groups whose norms and values were inimical to the pursuit of European economic goals were considered as being at a ‘low’ level of civilisation and hence excluded from ‘modern’ economic enterprise. [Abraham 1997: 50]

Such divisive policies generated insidious ideas about primordiality which were in turn perpetuated by conscious policies of segregation.

British colonial policy also seriously precluded any possibility for a nationalist consciousness uniting the three ethnic communities. The economic specialization among these groups created few opportunities for social interaction. [Nair 1999: 70]

The dissembling of such segregating notions takes time and requires imagination among later leaders. As discerning scholars have noted [*ibid.*: 74–75], a representative shift from a primordial understanding of ethnicity to a more situationalistic stand can be observed in Mahathir’s thought as expressed in *The Malay Dilemma* [1981] and in *Malaysia: The Way Forward* [1990].

The modern state apparatus governs by virtue of a purported peacekeeping and civilizing role. Consequently, one finds remnants of the three-tiered ethnology in federal politics which are further enhanced by (but separate from) the pre-colonial types of

sociocultural groupings engendered by the “imposition of a hierarchically organized, supralocal, state apparatus”: The ruler category comprising agents of the state, the peasant class controlled by the state, and the tribal category living outside the state structure [Benjamin 2002: 8–9]. In a post-colonial context, the three-tiered ethnography connects with indigeneity through the term *bumiputera* to strengthen claims for special rights for the Malays. This in turn has involved an ambition to understand the Orang Asli (“original people”), an ethnic category non-existent before 1960 [Nicholas 2000: 6], as Malays who have not modernized [Nicholas 2002: 122]. The groups classified as Orang Asli, numbering 106,131 in 1997 [Nicholas 2000: 4], have quickly, for tactical reasons, adopted a platform from which they can assert themselves within the social ontology favored by the state. Typical of measures taken against indigenous peoples, the post-colonial state seeks to reduce the independence of the Orang Asli: “In pursuit of the goal of reducing Orang Asli autonomy, the state instituted actions that hinted of internal colonialism—including administrative control, dispossession (of land and other resources), and forced and induced assimilation” [*ibid.*: 233].

We arrive now at a point where qualifying statements about British perpetuation of race divisions based on the three-tiered ethnography may provide further insights into the complexities of ethnic relations in Malaysia. Focusing on the pragmatic origins of socially salient concepts may not always change the facts of the matter as they are experienced. What may be accomplished in a longer perspective, however, is that we may learn to recognize ontological definitude as conceptual stiffness.

The aggressive policy of labor importation from second-tier regions like India and China also involved a simultaneous implementation of discursive habits based on the modern state organization.

... the imposition of colonial rule was the beginning of the introduction of the colonial sense of modernity, one which is based on the colonial versions of statehood, territoriality, ethnicity, history and culture—built on the presuppositions of the European experience. [Fernandez 1999: 46]

Given the three-tiered perspective, the British did not need to redefine all the peoples of the Malay world who were clearly not recent migrants into a new *ethnie*, the Malays. The notion of common history so vital to Social Darwinism was brought to bear on the cohesive symbolism, mythology and thus “irrationality” that were traditional to the region. As a new history was constructed, a new race was formed from peoples who until that period were clearly heterogeneous. A sustained joint monopoly on knowledge and power “goes to the extent of providing and reconstructing the identity of the Other so as the Other acts in line with the construct.” Ideals from the Enlightenment and the rule of the *demos* led to a preference for *mass history* instead of traditionally favored *heroic history* in defining ethnicity. This essentialistic view of ethnicity provided Malay

nationalism with politically flexible notions of a single people defining the cultural landscape of Southeast Asia [Fernandez 1999: 41]. A further step in the dissemination of modern ideas of political organization involved the transformation of geographic territories into geopolitical domains. Thus, through “scientific” descriptions, treaties, education, resource exploitation and administrative conquest, “modernity” was exported to the colonies.

European territorialism also cut Southeast Asia into separate metropolitan regions of control while distancing ethnic groups from each other, conceptually, politically and economically. The pluralistic world of the trading ports transformed into one of inter-ethnic apprehension and bartering. However, in the post-colonial age, an unraveling has begun. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations can be seen as a means to diminish barriers between nations in the region, which explains the eagerness with which the body, despite hard-handed opposition from the West, has accepted all countries in the region as members. The extended forum of Asean Plus Three (Korea, Japan and China) may be understood as a further development in the rebuilding of the insular nature of diplomatic and trade relations that were once basic to social life in Pacific Asia.

Studies done on the ethnic diversity in Southeast Asia have generated concepts now widely accepted within the social sciences. Disagreements abound between the different approaches involved, of course, happily providing material for anyone interested in the anatomy of epistemological limits. Hans-Dieter Evers recognized four descriptive strategies that had, at least before 1980, been developed by Western scholars and used influentially in studies of Southeast Asia and elsewhere [Evers 1980: 2–7]. This shows that Western scholarship about the region has not been static, and received knowledge from colonial times, though ubiquitous, does not remain unchallenged. These new perspectives provide alternative ways of looking at ethnically complex societies, giving us some distance with which to observe inter-ethnic phenomena:

1. The Dutch scholar J.H. Boeke coined the term Dual Society to explain how capitalism benefited one world and destroyed another. It enriched Europe and impoverished Southeast Asia. Within the latter, a westernized and affluent social stratum developed in contrast to, and in conflict with, a diminished “Eastern society.”
2. J.S. Furnivall developed his concept of “the plural society” to capture the silent divisions existent in most societies perpetuated by “the emphasis on production rather than social life” [Furnivall 1980: 88]. While this emphasis may be said to characterize modern societies in general, the import of this process in colonized areas was undeniably more profound, resulting among other things in a sharpened division between the indigenous and the urban.
3. The term “loosely structured social systems” was coined by John F. Embree, and as Evers noticed, its use practically generates empirical details about Boeke’s “Eastern society.” The Thai village that gave rise to this term had no enduring social co-operation, little concerted

social activity even when local concerns are involved, unstable patron-client relationships, and no functionally important groups at the local level besides kin groups and the monk network [Evers 1980: 4].

4. Clifford Geertz drew attention to how traditional peasant society goes through an “involution” caused by an “overdriving of an established form in such a way that it becomes rigid through an inward over-elaboration of detail” [Geertz 1980: 205]. The apparent inertia of the agricultural segment of colonial society is shown not to be due to any oriental dislike for change, but to the stark pressure exerted by the international economy on a functioning structure, forcing it to go into overdrive, and to become conservative in the process.

Despite the many obvious merits these terms have, some strands of Eurocentrism are nevertheless involved. First, their standard criteria are the state structure and the capitalist economy. Second, all the concepts try to capture some failing in the societies studied. They are therefore not neutral terms as such, but are apparently meant either to criticize colonialism and capitalism on the one hand, or to describe the passiveness and reactiveness of Asian societies, or both.

In Malaysia's case, one could say that the conflict within the dual society, as conceived by Boeke, has developed into one between nationalistic and religious definitions of the ideal multi-ethnic society, where “involution” can be freely used. Furnivall's term has been widely, and often wrongly, used. What he wants to draw attention to, however, are the strong divisions inherent in a plural society, where contacts between groups are limited and where concerns for the common good have not developed: “. . . a community which is confined to certain economic functions finds it more difficult to apprehend the social needs of the country as a whole” [Furnivall 1980: 88]. This lack of a common will and of co-ordinated cultural values tends to lead to moral deterioration [Evers 1980: 4]. Furnivall's concerns were about the colonial plural society. We may assume that the post-colonial plural society has a stronger sense of political and moral commonality, and there is a strong need, given the rhetorical potential that pluralism holds for politicians, to differentiate between the descriptive term “plural society” and the ideal of “multi-ethnicity.” The former focuses on the parallelism and the lack of integration in a country populated by many ethnicities, while the latter idealizes the integrated, yet pluralistic, society. In truth, societies tend to be dualistic in Furnivall's sense, separated either by ethnic traits or other factors, alienating and integrating at the same time. It is vital that we remind ourselves of our analytical assumption that societies like Malaysia's are somehow anomalies.

Beyond such approaches, Marxian perspectives of dependency and underdevelopment have been popular. At least two implications are involved when ethnicity is placed below class in discursive importance: First, a “false consciousness” of ethnicity encouraged by the dominant bourgeois class inhibits class unity among peasants and workers, and second, a point very obvious in the Malaysian case, where colonial policies

have created a coincidence of class and ethnicity, appeals to ethnic solidarity mask class privilege [Brown 1989: 60].

### **The Past's Configuration of the Present**

The geography of Southeast Asia has always encouraged trade contacts between civilizations and cultures, and ethnic separatism as the foundation of politics did not occur until the colonial period. Most riverine settlements had maritime economies and the populations were seldom homogenous [Hua 1983: 10].

The nature of relations between the Malays and the Chinese and other Asian traders and tin miners did not take on a communalistic form prior to colonialism. Chinese miners were often partners with Malay chiefs in economic ventures as well as allies in the constant civil wars between rulers. . . . Asian merchants took on the role of intermediaries only when European mercantilism began to dominate trade at Malacca and elsewhere on the peninsula. As a consequence of them serving as a link in the chain of exploitation, contradictions between Asian merchants and the Malays assumed antagonistic dimensions. [*ibid.*: 19]

The three-tiered ethnography of the British, together with the social distance afforded an extra-regional power, enhanced ethnic divisions wherever colonialism managed to come on land. In the colonial period, while immigrants came in large numbers from specific areas to specific occupations for specified indentures, the Malay power structure was absorbed, through the administrative practice of minimizing interference from London, into colonial governance itself.

Many of them were members of state councils in their personal capacity as members of the royal family or territorial chiefs. Thus their position in the administrative hierarchy was reinforced by their position in the Malay social structure. They continued to fulfil their functions as princes and chieftains while at the same time being adopted into the 'modernized' elite of the colonial civil services. [Puthucheary 1978: 26]

In time, the silent confidence that Malays had had in the colonial administration's ability to protect their rights against immigrants waned. An important consequence of this was that the traditional Malay elite cum civil servants came to be spokesmen for Malay interests. The Japanese occupation involved a centralization of this administration. The divisions between the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States and the Unfederated Malay States were abolished and training schools in Malacca and Singapore brought leaders of different ethnic groups together [*ibid.*: 27–28], a fact that had profound consequences for the future development of Malaysian politics.

Chinese organizational and business structures, it has been argued, enhanced links of mutual interests between these migrants and the colonial masters, at least until the beginning of the twentieth century. Migration was largely a male affair, making strong contacts with the British necessary, and this, together with British policies treating the Chinese as eternal transients, helped to conserve the latter's feeling for China as their eternal home [Abraham 1997: 135-142]. This in turn encouraged the British to rule them through their own leaders. The economic ability of the Chinese was something quite obvious to the British, who were after all in the region for economic reasons in the first place. The same propensity was clearly not recognized among those of the "natives" category [Harper 1999: 26]. The case should not be overstated since we are dealing with great differences in cultural values, and the criteria for what the British desired as industriousness were hardly objective. Sociological and existential differences among peoples involved in colonial life also helped to perpetuate notions about primordial characteristics. Urbanity, for example, came with the colonial towns and the new colonial administrative centers like Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Kuantan and Taiping. As always, these attracted immigrants and strengthened the notional division between "rural Malays" and "urban Chinese," between "lazy natives" and "busy migrants." This gap was institutionally and conceptually reinforced over time into one that had apparent essentialistic grounds. In Singapore for example, although Malays were statistically the most urbanized of the three ethnic groups, their leaders persisted in naming them "rural."

As British colonialism drew to a close, the machinations of the period were to become conclusive for the future political configuration of the new "nation-state." The colonial system had developed in slow stages from an administrative and advisory organization into a centralized power that now focused on post-colonial considerations. As in most cases, it is a myth that power controls development. It is truer to say that the powerful survive through successful *ad hoc* restructuring in the face of broad changes that they only partly brought about.

If we are to counteract the divisive and demeaning effects of ethnocentric politics, it is vital that the many historical factors that have contributed to its present currency be thoroughly analyzed. It must be admitted that the conditions leading up to Merdeka were extremely hurried and desperate. The Japanese occupation left behind an increased consciousness about ethnic strife that was to be further worsened by the Malayan Union policy that the returning British, now showing more consideration for migrant Chinese after having co-operated both with forces in Mainland China and with guerilla anti-Japanese groups in the Malayan jungle [Lau 1991: 67-68], tried to implement. The rejection of this policy led to the institutionalization of ethnic politics through the formation of ethnic-based political parties that would later totally dominate Malaysian politics, and to the open rebellion of the communists.

The solutions of the first years of independent existence did work rather well. However, this does not mean that their discursive and institutional consequences were all



positive, especially in the long run. Sometime soon, these need to be discontinued and replaced by solutions relevant to the present time, and which dissolve past failings. As Shamsul A. B. notes, the Malay world suffered at least four profound changes as a result of “colonial knowledge” [Shamsul 2002]:

1. Malay societies were redefined in ethnic terms, fragmenting a pluralistic world into a tense collection of national “plural societies”;
2. The “nation-state” is taken to be a central and natural unit of human co-existence, leading to what I call a “nationisation” of knowledge.
3. The populations of the colonies were conditioned mentally and culturally to accept the unavoidability of modernization and all its detrimental effects.
4. Analytical categories that stem from the West’s analysis of its own experiences configure the “lived reality” of the former colonies.

The three-tiered ethnography applied over time led in a self-fulfilling manner to concrete differences between the proselytized categories. In 1970, in the aftermath of the racial riots and just before the New Economic Policy (NEP) was implemented to break the apparent symbiosis between ethnicity and economic well-being, 63.4% of all foreign capital in Malaysia belonged to British citizens, 27.2% to Malaysian Chinese, 1.1% to Indians and 2.4% to Bumiputeras (defined *in practice* as Malays) [Drabble 2000: 198]. At first glance, one would think that the main problem was the imbalance between foreign and domestic ownership of capital, and that the issue was more international than domestic. The ethnic clashes preceding the formulation of the NEP had, however, overshadowed the foreign-domestic issue. Furthermore, the inter-ethnic aspect in Malaysian political analysis has always been overpowering.

While the ethnic category of Malays populates large areas of Southeast Asia, it is only in Malaysia that the division between migrants and natives has become the foundation for the national discourse. This in itself makes the country a unique case study of how past conceptual divisions that were conducive to political control continue to configure problems and solutions. The final questions to be asked are: Can a polity based on ethnic segregation peacefully transcend its constraints? Or must it accept its limits for as long as it can?

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